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CRITICAL NOTES

THE KINGDOM AND THE MUSTARD SEED

If the crux in the study of primitive Christianity is the eschatological problem, the crux in the eschatological problem is the question: For Jesus, is the Kingdom of God present or future? Is he establishing it or is he preparing for it? *Is he* Messiah or *is he to be* Messiah? During recent years New Testament scholars have for the first time been coming to view the eschatological language of their sources historically instead of dogmatically, and to recognize that though, as Père Batiffol said, "Jesus promised the Kingdom of God, what came was the Church," the church was not the Kingdom of God he was meaning to promise. Though there are outstanding exceptions, students of Jesus' mission have very generally come to recognize that he was a literal eschatologist, sharing the conviction of John Baptist that the long-expected Kingdom of God was at hand, to be realized within his own generation, and this not in some figurative, inner, "spiritual" sense, but as an outward world-renewal, essentially as the prophets and apocalyptists had foretold. They have come further to recognize that, at least during the later weeks or months of his career, Jesus believed himself called and destined to be Messiah, the divine agent in the establishment of the new order, meaning by Messiah essentially what a first-century Jew would understand it to mean, not a modern homiletic "spiritual" reinterpretation of that ancient title. So far there seems to be rather widespread agreement.

But being asked when the Kingdom of God cometh, Jesus' answer is not understood alike by all, for his answer, at least as expressed in our extant sources, seems not to be clear, explicit, unequivocal. To be sure, the bulk of his utterances reveal precisely the attitude expressed in the petition of his model prayer: "Thy Kingdom come." He looks forward to the arrival of a state not now present, at a day and an hour unknown to himself, as to all men and all angels, though surely within the limits of the present generation. So of his own functioning as Messiah; that is to begin when the Kingdom begins. His parting words to a hostile people are, "I am Messiah, and ye shall see the Son of Man coming,"

where his messiahship becomes actual with his apocalyptic advent. Such is the conception reflected in the bulk of his sayings, as we need not pause to demonstrate. But students find, so they tell us, here and there sayings of another sort, which seem to indicate that in some sense and to some degree the Kingdom of God had begun to be during and in Jesus' mission; that it was already present in part, though not in full realization, and that Jesus, therefore, was already Messiah, not only in personal identity, but in function. Many general considerations, as well as the bulk of Jesus' utterance, already adduced, make strongly against this view, but we must face these alleged contradictory passages. Shall we reject them as not genuine utterances of the Master, because untrue to his clear position, or is there a way of understanding them as congruous with the prevailing expression? If it be true that they really express a view opposed to the futuristic view of the prevailing tenor of Jesus' teaching and of all general considerations, then surely they are to be flatly rejected as not genuine expressions of Jesus' thought. We may not believe him to have been vague, uncertain, of wavering mind on this cardinal point. But the indicated lack of harmony between these sayings and the others may conceivably be due, not to Jesus himself, but to his reporters, translators, and exegetes.

There is a saying in Luke (17:21), without parallel elsewhere, that famous saying, dear to the homilist, "The kingdom of God is within you," which we tear out of one of the most futuristic and apocalyptic contexts in the whole New Testament to use in this translation and this timeless sense. Behind our ambiguous English rendering is a less ambiguous Greek, and behind that a probably still less ambiguous Aramaic, which, unless the whole passage is nonsense, can only have meant, "As you are vainly looking here and looking there, hoping by observation to foresee the approach of the catastrophe, lo, of a sudden, the kingdom of God shall be there, in your startled midst, like the incalculable lightning-flash," which is the figure dominating this verse and its immediate context. This is not a static description of the *locus* of the Kingdom, but a vivid declaration of the suddenness of its appearing, as are all the verses that follow.

Then there is the saying (Matt. 12:28=Luke 11:20) which we read in our English Testament as, "Then is the kingdom of God come upon you." But the Greek verb here (*ἐφθασεν*) does not signify precisely what *ἐλήλυθεν* would mean; it is *hapax legomenon* in the gospels, and is surely chosen by the Greek renderer of Jesus' Aramaic discourse to express a special shade of meaning. That meaning is well brought out

in Burkitt's translation, "It shews you the Kingdom of God at your doors before you were aware of it."¹ This one Greek verb, with whatever ambiguity may attach to it, cannot be regarded as proving a second point of view in Jesus' mind.

On the whole, more weighty in this connection than the exact exegesis of the isolated and ambiguous Greek phrases ἐν τοῖς ἡμέραις and ἐφθασεν, is the witness of a whole group of parables, generally called "the parables of the Kingdom of God," from the introductory phrase, "the kingdom of God is like," or equivalent wording. The most often cited of these is the parable of the Mustard Seed, which begins in Mark (4:30-32), "How shall we liken the kingdom of God, or in what parable shall we set it forth? It is like a grain of mustard seed," etc. Luke (13:18 f.) has practically the same wording, while Matthew (13:31 f.), in his stereotyped fashion, writes, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed." The likeness of the Kingdom to the seed is thus clearly stated by all three, and is naturally always made the norm of the exegesis of the parable. Precisely this locution is not found again in Mark, though the immediately preceding parable (4:26-29) has something very like it: "so is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed on the earth," etc. These are the only parables which Mark verbally connects with the Kingdom. The locution, however, is especially characteristic of Matthew. The parable of the Tares, his substitute for the Markan parable of the Self-growing Seed, just cited, begins, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field" (13:24-30). Then (13:33), "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." Then (13:44), "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a treasure hidden in the field." Then (13:45 f.), "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls." Again (13:47 f.), "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was cast into the sea." None of these parables is in Luke except that of the leaven, where Luke reads (13:20 f.), "Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like unto leaven," etc. It is this group of parables in Matt., chap. 13, which is commonly called the parables of

¹ F. C. Burkitt, *Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (1914), p. 22. Similarly, in the *Interpreter*, VII, 147, Burkitt gives the sense of the phrase, "a reality on the point of arriving, like the wind before the thunderstorm." Compare the comment of Franz Dibelius, in *Studien und Kritiken* (1913), p. 287; the Kingdom of God has come *over* you (ἐφ' ὑμᾶς), i.e., not yet come to you, but gathered above you and soon to come down on you (as in I Thess. 2:16).

the Kingdom of God. Before we ask them to testify in our present inquiry, let us follow Matthew's use of this same introductory phrase in his later pages.

We find (18:23-34) that "the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king who would make a reckoning with his servants." Further (20:1-15), "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that was a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard." In 22:1-13, "the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, who made a marriage feast for his son," while in 25:1-12 we find that "the kingdom of heaven shall be likened unto ten virgins . . . and five of them were foolish and five were wise." In these four instances, exegetes have not, as a rule, sought a statement of what the kingdom is like, although the declarations of Matthew are perfectly definite that it is like a king making a reckoning with his servants, like a householder hiring laborers, like a king giving a marriage feast, like ten virgins. We all ignore entirely these purely formal statements, taking them as merely a piece of meaningless Matthean rhetoric, and proceed to interpret the stories at their face value, precisely as if they began, "A certain king would make a reckoning with his servants, and when," etc.; or "There was a man who was a householder who went out," etc.; or, "A certain king made a marriage feast for his son," etc.; or, "There were ten virgins who took their lamps," etc. These stories may or may not on examination prove to have some illustrative bearing on the Kingdom of God; in any case the Kingdom is not like the person or thing happening to be named first, nor did Matthew, still less Jesus, mean to say that it was. Immediately after the parable of the Ten Virgins, Matthew writes, "For as a man, going into another country, called his own servants," etc. (25:14-30, the parable of the Talents). It is pure accident, with no calculation, that he did not write, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man going," etc., nor would any exegete conceive it to alter in the slightest degree the interpretation of the parable had it so begun. In the parable of the Marriage Feast, Luke's parallel begins, "A certain man made a great supper." Does anyone suppose that Luke means anything different from Matthew because he does not write, "The kingdom of God is like a certain man who made a great supper"? Or would anyone, from Luke's text, have suspected a likeness between this distracted host and the Kingdom? He may be like God in a certain situation; he certainly is in no respect like the Kingdom. Just before this parable Matthew has another, the parable of the Vineyard, which he begins, this time following Mark and so omitting

his usual phrase, "There was a man that was a householder, who planted a vineyard," etc. Left to himself, Matthew would have said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man that was a householder, who planted a vineyard," etc. But he would have meant nothing different. All these parables we take as simple stories, and ask for the obvious meaning of the story, quite without regard for the phrase about the Kingdom. So far our discussion is a repetition of very familiar positions.

Now *exactly* the same procedure is in order with all the so-called "Kingdom-of-God parables" in Matt., chap. 13. The very name is misleading and begs the whole question. "Only in the editorial process," says Johannes Weiss,¹ "have they been placed under this rubric." They are one and all simple, brief stories or pictures of life, each with an obvious illustrative value. They may or may not illustrate some aspect of the Kingdom of God, but the introductory phrase, in its one or two occurrences in Mark, and constantly in Matthew, is absolutely as conventional, artificial, and meaningless as in Matthew's later examples. In plain words, the Kingdom of God is *not* like a grain of mustard seed at all, any more than it is like ten virgins, or like a king calling his stewards to account. All the elaborate exegesis that tells us how the Kingdom is like the seed, because it is planted and grows gradually into full and splendid stature, is so much wasted ingenuity. If there is anything in the world the Kingdom is *not* like, in Jesus' mind, it is a gradually growing seed, whose increase can be daily noted. Rather, as he repeatedly says, it is as sudden and unexpected as a flash of lightning. He exhausts all the resources of the Old Testament and of his own imagination to depict its abrupt and unlooked-for dawning. It is like Noah's flood, like Sodom and Gomorrah, like the burglar, like the returning master, like the tardy bridegroom, like everything that comes "in such an hour as ye think not. Watch therefore; when men are saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them; let your loins be girded about and your lamps burning, and be ye yourselves like men looking for their lord, that when he cometh and knocketh they may straightway open to him." The Kingdom of God is like *that*; it is not in the least like the mustard seed, growing slowly, surely, equably, visibly, into a tree. Jesus never said it was like such a seed. Nor did he ever mean to say it was like leaven, slowly and surely leavening a mass of dough.

One only needs to compare the twin parables in Matt. 13:44-46 to see how futile is any exegesis based on this phrasing. "The king-

¹ *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XVI, 449.

dom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid, and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field." Very good; by chance the phrase happens to fit fairly well here. But go on. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls, and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." These are twin parables, with one point, and we may safely defy any exegete to point out how the Kingdom is in one case like the treasure and in the other like the man who found it. "There was a treasure hidden in a field; there was a merchant seeking goodly pearls"; so the little stories should begin, standing on their own feet; then we may ask whether the pearl and the treasure illustrate the exceeding price of the Kingdom: doubtless they do. Illuminating here is the so-called (and miscalled) parable of the Sower, which in all the synoptics begins this parabolic discourse. Mark (4:1-8) begins, "Behold, the sower went forth to sow." Matthew (13:3-8) repeats the same words, and Luke (8:5-8) has, "The sower went forth to sow his seed." In this fashion all the parables should begin, so far as their real intent is concerned. It is sheer accident, not any difference of meaning, that keeps this parable from beginning, especially in Matthew, "The kingdom of heaven is like a sower who went forth to sow." Mark, indeed, relates this and the other parables to the kingdom by his following words, "Unto you (disciples) is given the mystery of the Kingdom of God, but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables," words repeated by Matthew and Luke. But it never occurs to anyone to seek light on the nature of the Kingdom by tracing a likeness between it and the sower, or even between it and the seed. As a matter of fact, the sower is unessential to the parable's point. It might as well begin, "As seed was sown, some fell," etc.; it is not a parable of the Sower, but of the various sorts of soil, as Jülicher calls it. Here alone lies its significance. The early Christian exegesis of it put by all three evangelists into Jesus' mouth is, to be sure, not from Jesus, but it expresses in a rough and ready, if all too allegorical, fashion, what he had in mind. He is the sower; the seed is his message; the soil is the varying hearts of men; the fruitful grain, bearing thirty, sixty, a hundred fold, is the responsive and faithful disciple, with his works of love and brotherhood.

Precisely the same situation is illuminated by the parable of the Mustard Seed. The sower is the same, the seed is the same, the grain bearing a hundred fold corresponds to the tree in whose branches nest

the birds of the heaven. Neither is the Kingdom of God; both refer to Jesus' own work in proclaiming the message of the Kingdom and the call of God. He and his work are obscure, his following is partial and at best scanty, but he has faith that in the end there will be an abundant harvest.¹ The seed is tiny; but, planted, it will grow, and a great company of ransomed souls, a great body of citizens ready for the coming Kingdom, will be the full growth, or the fruit. As thus the fruits of his work will be abundant, just so later he faces death in the serene confidence that he will give his life for the ransoming of many. Here is faith sublime. "A man casts seed on the earth and lies down to sleep and rises, night and day, and the seed springs up and grows, he knows not how. The earth bears fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And *when the fruit is ripe, then* he puts forth the sickle, because the harvest is come." Then, and not till then, dawns the Kingdom of God. That is what all these parables are saying; not what the Kingdom of God is like, but what faith Jesus has in the ultimate, divinely blessed consummation of his humble efforts. The parable of the Leaven but repeats the same thought in a new figure. Jesus' message and influence *were* like leaven; what could be more vivid and apt? They were like a mustard seed, or like the sower's grain, scattered prodigally on every soil, sure somewhere to find fertile ground and conditions of abundant fruition.²

But Jesus never thought and never said that the Kingdom of God, to whose blessed advent he looked forward, was like a grain of seed or a bit of leaven. Whether the conventional Semitic rhetorical phrase, "both ancient and usual as a Jewish preface to parables,"³ which seems to make him declare such likeness in our Greek and English translations, is due originally to him or to his reporters is a question outside our present

¹ Henry Churchill King (*The Ethics of Jesus* [1910], pp. 62 f.), says, "The parable of the mustard seed . . . seems to me plainly not primarily eschatological. . . . It is one of his own encouragements of himself."

² Cf. McNeile *ad* Matt., chap. 13 (p. 204), on the six parables of this chapter. "He seems to be describing His own experiences. He and the disciples had preached with varying success (Sower and Dragnet); the failures had been due to the opposing influence of the Devil (Tares); but nevertheless the preaching had brought to earth the beginnings of a development which would end in the splendid consummation (Mustard Seed and Leaven), to share in which is a prize worth any sacrifice (Treasure and Pearl)."

³ *Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem* (1911), p. 52. In the same volume, p. 276, Allen remarks that the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" "may of course in such a parable as the mustard seed denote anything that anybody cares to read into it."

inquiry.¹ Nor can we here inquire how far certain forces and ideals of the Kingdom were already beginning to be effective, in such fashion as to serve for Jesus as an earnest and a certain proof of the imminence of the new age itself. In any case, with a true understanding of these parables, mistakenly called parables of the Kingdom of God, disappears the last exegetical basis for the idea that Jesus thought of the Kingdom as something already present, in some degree, in his own time and his own activity.

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MEADVILLE THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

¹ Cf. Weinel, *Biblische Theologie des N.T.*, 2te Auflage (1913), pp. 51 f.: "To be sure it is here not certain how far the introductory phrases, in which alone for the most part the thought of the Kingdom of Heaven stands, really belong to the material, and how far they are Matthew's own addition. . . . It remains in part open to question how far the parables speak of the Kingdom of God at all. . . . Among Matthew's 'Kingdom-of-heaven Parables' there are quite a number which have nothing whatever to do with the Kingdom of God as such."